PATTERNS OF POWER

Just Enough

The Subsistence Equilibrium of Stable Hierarchies — Why the Extractor Takes to the Exact Edge of the Revolt Threshold, Where the Cost of Living Meets the Cost of Rising, and No Further

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Preface

The inquiry has answered two of the three questions one can ask about the settlement at the base of every durable order — who is inside it, and how it holds. This study takes the third, narrower and more human: of the man at the very bottom, the peasant or serf or slave or labourer, how much is taken from him, and why the answer, across the long-lasting civilisations, is so monotonously the same — the bare edge of survival, with just enough to keep working and breeding and little more.

Two ready stories explain the subsistence line, and both are false: the apologist's, that it is all a poor world can afford — the iron law of nature; and the sentimentalist's mirror, that it is the measure of the masters' cruelty. This study argues a third thing, colder and truer: that the subsistence line is not where mercy stops nor where the world's poverty stops, but where the *arithmetic* stops. It is the equilibrium of two ledgers. The extractor's ledger drives the bottom always downward, because every increment left to the subject is surplus lost. The subject's ledger sets a hard floor beneath the descent, because he endures any burden that leaves him alive — revolt means near-certain death, and survival is the one thing he cannot gamble — but rises the moment extraction crosses into starvation, when compliance too means death and he has nothing left to lose. Between the downward drive and the hard floor lies one stable point: the subject held at subsistence.

The threshold is not fixed. It is set by two dials the extractor can turn — the credibility of the force that punishes revolt, and the availability of any exit by which the subject might flee — and where both are shut, extraction sinks below subsistence to the bone. The Black Death is offered as the proof: when the plague made labour scarce and turned the dial of exit, the floor rose and serfdom broke where the doors could not be shut, and the same shock drove the floor lower where the lords could collude to shut them. The study leans on Olson on the stationary bandit, on Scott and Thompson on the subsistence ethic and the revolt it licenses, and on the economic historians of serfdom; each is explained where it is used. It closes on the cold hope the arithmetic yields: that the floor rises whenever a dial turns — when the force weakens, a door opens, or the subject makes his own extraction cost too much — which is the only way it has ever risen.

A Note on This Collaboration

As throughout, the spine is Thomas J. Bryan's — in this case an observation he arrived at directly: that across the durable civilisations the man at the bottom is found at subsistence, that this is no accident, and that it follows from the same benefit-against-cost reckoning, corrected by the two caveats, that runs beneath the whole project. The extractor gains nothing by giving more; the subject, facing death if he rises, complies until compliance itself means death — and so an equilibrium settles at the edge of survival. The model's work has been to set that insight against the scholarship on peasant rebellion and on the economics of coerced labour, and to find it not only confirmed but named: under coercion, the worker is left, in the historians' own phrase, just enough to subsist.

The study keeps the project's disciplines. Where it leans on a scholar it pauses to explain the mechanism plainly. It distinguishes its own strategic account of the subsistence line from the demographic one — the iron law of wages — that an earlier study traced as a robe, holding that the two roads run alongside and the robe shows only the one that absolves. And it refuses both the apologist's fatalism and the sentimentalist's appeal to mercy, insisting that the floor is set by dials that can be turned, and has in fact been turned, which is neither despair nor comfort but a map. The whole is held as tested, not revealed.

The Argument in Seven Parts

I — The Question of How Much. The inquiry has settled who is inside the order and how it holds; here it asks how much is taken from the man at the bottom, and why the answer, across the durable civilisations, is so consistently the bare edge of survival. Not the iron law of nature, not the cruelty of masters, but a third thing: where the arithmetic stops.

II — The Extractor's Ledger. For the owner in a stable order, giving the subject anything above the minimum is pure cost and yields no benefit, so his rational course is to take everything down to some floor. Olson's stationary bandit keeps the peasant productive, not comfortable. The only question is what sets the floor.

III — The Subject's Ledger. The man at the bottom complies, however heavy the burden, so long as compliance leaves him alive — revolt means near-certain death and survival is the one thing he cannot gamble. Scott's subsistence ethic and safety-first. He rises only when extraction crosses into starvation and he has nothing left to lose.

IV — The Equilibrium. The two ledgers together fix the bottom at exactly subsistence — high enough that the subject still has his life to lose, low enough that the extractor has taken all he safely can. This, not mercy and not the world's poverty, is why the durable orders hold their people at the edge; the iron law of wages is the robe over it.

V — The Two Dials. The subsistence line is not fixed but set by two things the extractor can turn: the credibility of the force that punishes revolt, and the availability of any exit by which the subject might flee. Where the force is most terrible and all doors are shut, extraction is driven not to subsistence but to the bone.

VI — The Black Death. When one dial moves, the equilibrium moves: the plague made labour scarce and turned the dial of exit, and where the lords could not shut that door the floor rose and serfdom broke, while where they could shut it the same shock drove the floor lower — the second serfdom. One plague, two outcomes, sorted by the dial.

VII — The Floor That Rises. The share of the man at the bottom is fixed by neither mercy nor nature but by the revolt threshold, and rises only when a dial turns in his favour — when the force weakens, a door opens, or he gains the power to make his extraction costly. The cold hope the whole arithmetic finally yields.

A Note on Sources

This study joins an observation of the project's own to the literatures on peasant rebellion and on the economics of unfree labour.

The ledgers. That even a self-interested ruler has an encompassing interest in his subjects' productivity — though that interest keeps the peasant productive, not comfortable — is Mancur Olson's stationary bandit. That the peasant lives by a subsistence ethic and a safety-first rule, refusing the gamble of revolt so long as he has something left to lose and rising when his subsistence itself is breached, is James C. Scott's, in "The Moral Economy of the Peasant" (1976); the kindred analysis of the English food riot, where the crowd rose to defend a customary subsistence, is E. P. Thompson's (1971).

The dials and the proof. That whether labour scarcity freed or further bound the peasant turned on whether his outside options exceeded the returns to coercion is Daron Acemoglu and Alexander Wolitzky's analysis of the divergence after the Black Death — serfdom dying in the market-rich West, intensifying into the second serfdom in the East — which sits alongside the older models of North and Thomas and the wider record of the post-plague economy. Modern works are paraphrased and credited, not quoted at length.

The lineage. Beneath all of it lies this project's own corpus — the floor of force and the cost column it fills, the foreclosure of exit named in the study of containment, the openings of elite chaos, the settlement of who owns what, and the iron law of wages traced as a robe in the genealogy of the economic warrant — of which this study is the account of how much the settlement takes, and why.

PART I

THE QUESTION OF HOW MUCH

That the inquiry has settled who is inside the order and how the order holds, leaving one question about the man at the bottom — how much is taken from him, and why the answer, across the durable civilisations, is so consistently the bare edge of survival

The project has answered, by now, two of the three great questions one can ask about the settlement at the base of every durable order. It has answered *who is inside it* — the armed, the elite, the coalition that divides the world among themselves — and it has answered *how it holds* — by the credible cost of defection sitting in every ledger at once, the floor of force translated into the arithmetic of the governed. There remains a third question, narrower and more human than either, and it is the one this study takes up: of the man at the very bottom, the peasant or the serf or the slave or the labourer, *how much is taken from him* — and why is it that, when one looks back across the long-lasting civilisations, the answer is so monotonously the same? The peasant of pharaonic Egypt and the peasant of medieval France and the slave of the Roman *latifundium* and the labourer of the early factory are found, again and again, living at the same place: the bare edge of survival, the subsistence line, with just enough to keep working and breeding and little or nothing more.

Why there, of all places

This is so familiar that it is rarely asked why it should be so, and the failure to ask is itself a victory for the robe. For there are two stories ready to explain the subsistence line, and both are false. The first is the apologist's: that the bottom sits at subsistence because that is all the order can afford to give it, the natural and regrettable limit of a poor world — the iron law of nature, as an earlier study in this project found the economic warrant phrasing it. The second is the sentimentalist's mirror image: that the bottom sits at subsistence because the powerful are cruel, that the line is a measure of wickedness, and that kinder masters would lift it. Both miss the structure entirely, and this study will argue a third thing, which is colder than either and truer than both. *The subsistence line is not where mercy stops, nor where the world's poverty stops. It is where the arithmetic stops.* It is the equilibrium of a calculation run, from opposite sides, by the extractor and the extracted — each totting up his own ledger by the logic this project has called position-logic — and it falls exactly where it does because that is the one stable point at which both ledgers balance. To see why, one must read the two ledgers in turn, beginning with the man who takes.

PART II

THE EXTRACTOR'S LEDGER

That for the owner in a stable order, giving the subject anything above the minimum is pure cost and yields no benefit, so that his rational course is to take everything down to some floor — and the only question that matters is what sets the floor

Begin with the ledger of the extractor — the landlord, the master, the lord, the owner of the means by which the man at the bottom lives — and run position-logic on him exactly as the project runs it on everyone. He acts on benefit against cost, by what he values; and what he values, in his capacity as extractor, is the surplus he can take. Now ask what his ledger says about *generosity* — about leaving the peasant more than the minimum. In a stable order, where the peasant cannot leave and cannot resist, the answer is stark: leaving the peasant more is pure *cost* to the extractor, a direct subtraction from his own surplus, and it buys him nothing in return, because the peasant's compliance is already guaranteed by other means. Generosity, on this ledger, has a price and no benefit. The rational extractor therefore does not give; he takes, and he takes as much as he can — down to whatever floor exists beneath him.

The bandit who stays, and the surplus he keeps

This is not a caricature of human greed; it is simply what the ledger says, and the best students of the subject have said the same. The economist Mancur Olson, whose stationary bandit this project has met before, showed that even the most self-interested ruler has an *encompassing interest* in his subjects' productivity — he will not slaughter the goose — but that interest points toward keeping the peasant *productive*, not toward keeping him *comfortable*, and a peasant is productive at subsistence. The economic historians who have studied serfdom find the pattern in its rawest form: under systems of labour coercion, the worker was paid, as one analysis puts it, only enough to cover his subsistence, and the entire difference between what he produced and what he consumed was captured by the lord. That is the extractor's ledger fully worked out: take the whole surplus, leave the worker exactly his keep, pocket the difference. So the extractor, left to his own arithmetic, drives the man at the bottom downward, always downward, toward the floor — and the only thing in the whole system that stops the descent, the only thing that sets a floor beneath it at all, is something on the *other* ledger. To find the floor, one must turn to the man being driven down, and ask what, in his own reckoning, he will finally not endure.

PART III

THE SUBJECT'S LEDGER

That the man at the bottom complies, however heavy the burden, so long as compliance leaves him alive — because revolt means near-certain death and survival is the one thing he cannot gamble — and that he rises only when the burden grows so heavy that compliance, too, means death, and he has at last nothing left to lose

Now the other ledger, the one that sets the floor: the ledger of the man being driven down. Run position-logic on the peasant, and the first thing to see is why he endures so much. His cost column is, of all the ledgers in the order, the most heavily loaded, because for him the cost of revolt is the most extreme there is: near-certain death. To rise against the order is to face the floor of force — the soldiers, the gallows, the punitive expedition — and to lose, as the previous studies showed the lone uprising almost always loses; and if he does not fight he can rarely flee, for in a foreclosed order there is nowhere to run and survive. So the peasant's cost of revolt is, in plain terms, death. And against that, so long as compliance leaves him *alive* — so long as the extraction, however brutal, stops just short of starving him — compliance offers the one benefit that outweighs everything: continued survival. Certain survival beats near-certain death, on any ledger, by any values. And so the peasant complies. He complies under burdens that look, from outside, unendurable, because the safety of mere survival is the one thing his position cannot afford to gamble.

Safety first, and the moment of nothing left to lose

This is precisely what the anthropologist James Scott found when he studied the peasant from the inside, and named the *subsistence ethic*. The peasant, living always close to the margin, plays what Scott called "safety first": his overriding priority is never to fall below subsistence, and he will therefore refuse almost any gamble that risks dropping him below that line, even a gamble that might, if it paid off, lift him well above it. Revolt is the ultimate such gamble, and the subsistence ethic counsels against it with iron consistency — *so long as the peasant has something left to lose.* But now follow the ledger to its hinge, the point on which this whole study turns. Suppose the extractor, driving downward as his own ledger commands, pushes past the line — takes so much that compliance no longer leaves the peasant alive, that obedience now means starvation as surely as revolt means the sword. At that moment the two costs equalise. Death by compliance, death by revolt: the cost column reads the same on both sides. And the instant it does, the benefit column decides everything — for revolt, unlike starvation, carries a *chance*, however slim, of a benefit: food seized, a lord killed, a burden lifted, a new order, or merely the dignity of dying on one's feet rather than on one's knees. When compliance is certain death, even a one-in-twenty chance of survival through revolt is the better bet, and the safety-first logic that for generations counselled endurance now, with the same cold arithmetic, counsels rising. This is why, as Scott found and as the historian E. P. Thompson found before him in the food riots of the English crowd, peasants and labourers revolt not when they are merely oppressed — they endure oppression almost without limit — but when their subsistence itself is torn away, when the customary floor beneath their survival is breached. The revolt threshold is the subsistence line. A man rises when, and not before, he has nothing left to lose.

Part IV

THE EQUILIBRIUM

That the two ledgers together fix the bottom at exactly subsistence — high enough that the subject still has his life to lose and so will not rise, low enough that the extractor has taken all he safely can — and that this, not mercy and not the poverty of the world, is why the durable orders hold their people at the edge

Now lay the two ledgers side by side, and the subsistence line appears not as an accident or a cruelty but as an equilibrium — the single point at which both calculations come to rest. The extractor's ledger drives the bottom *downward*, always toward less, because every increment left to the subject is surplus lost. The subject's ledger sets a hard floor *beneath* the descent, because the moment extraction crosses the subsistence line the subject has nothing left to lose and the whole arithmetic of his compliance flips to revolt. Between the downward drive and the hard floor there is exactly one stable resting point: the subject held at subsistence — low enough that the extractor has taken all he can take, high enough that the subject still has his life to lose and so still, by his own safety-first reckoning, prefers compliance to the gamble of rising. Push the bottom any lower and the order buys itself a revolt; hold it any higher and the extractor is simply leaving surplus on the table that his own ledger tells him to take. Subsistence is where the two ledgers balance.

Why the old orders all look the same

This is the answer to the question the study opened with — why the durable civilisations, across every continent and every century, are found holding their peasants and slaves at the same bare edge. It is not because they were all equally poor, nor because their masters were all equally cruel. It is because they were all *stable*, and a stable order is one that has found this equilibrium and settled into it — has discovered, through the long and bloody education of revolts suffered and extractions that went too far, exactly where the floor lies, and has learned to take everything down to it and stop. The masters who took less left surplus uncollected and were, over the generations, outcompeted or displaced by those who took more; the masters who took more than the floor allowed bought themselves the revolts that ruined them; and what survived, what we see when we look back at the orders that lasted, is the equilibrium that remained when both errors had been selected out. The subsistence line is the signature of a hierarchy that has learned its own arithmetic. And here the robe of the economic warrant, which an earlier study traced, does its work — for it takes this equilibrium, this contingent balance of two ledgers, and renames it the *iron law of wages*, a law of nature fixing the labourer at subsistence by the impersonal mechanics of population, so that what is in truth the outcome of a power relation appears as the verdict of arithmetic itself. The demographic mechanism the iron law describes is real and runs alongside; but beneath it, and prior to it, is this colder thing — the extractor taking to the exact edge of what the subject will endure, and the subject enduring to the exact edge of survival. Two roads to the same line. The robe shows only the one that absolves the powerful.

Part V

THE TWO DIALS

That the subsistence line is not fixed but set by two things the extractor can turn — the credibility of the force that punishes revolt, and the availability of any exit by which the subject might escape — so that where the floor is most terrible and all doors are shut, extraction can be driven not to subsistence but to the very bone

The subsistence equilibrium is not, however, a fixed point in nature, and this is the part of the analysis that turns it from a grim resignation into a usable map. The revolt threshold — the line below which the subject would rather rise than comply — is itself *set* by two variables, and both of them are things the extractor can, within limits, control. Turn either dial, and the line moves; and where the order can turn both dials hard against the subject, the floor beneath extraction sinks below ordinary subsistence toward the biological bone.

The dial of force, and the dial of exit

The first dial is the *credibility of the force* that punishes revolt — what the economists studying coerced labour call the returns to coercion. The revolt threshold depends on how certain death-by-revolt actually is, and that certainty is something the order manufactures. The more terrifying and unfailing the punishment — the more reliably the runaway is caught, the rebel broken, the village made an example — the more a subject will endure before the gamble of revolt looks worth it, because the chance of benefit on the revolt side of his ledger has been driven toward zero. A more credible floor of force thus *lowers* the subsistence line the extractor can push to: terror buys extraction. The second dial is the availability of *exit* — whether the subject has anywhere to flee and survive. This is the dial the project elsewhere called foreclosure, and it works directly on the subject's outside option. If he can run to a town, a frontier, a rival lord who will have him, then his threshold is *high*: he will leave long before he starves, and to keep him at all the extractor must leave him enough to make staying better than going. But if every door is shut — if the towns are few, the borders sealed, the neighbouring lords in collusion not to take each other's runaways — then the subject has no outside option, the exit dial reads zero, and the extractor can drive him down and down, because there is nowhere for him to go but the grave. Where both dials are turned fully against the subject — where the force is most terrible and every exit is shut — the floor beneath extraction drops below subsistence-with-dignity to the bare biological minimum, and sometimes below even that, to the deliberate working-to-death of a population that can be replaced. The plantation, the mine, the death-camp labour battalion, the most total of serfdoms: these are not failures of the equilibrium but its extreme, the equilibrium found where the subject has been stripped of both the power to rise and the power to leave. The bone is where the line goes when both dials are shut.

PART VI

THE BLACK DEATH

That when a single dial moves, the equilibrium moves with it — for when the plague made labour scarce, the subject's exit option improved, and where the lords could not shut that door the floor under extraction rose and serfdom broke, while where they could shut it the same shock drove the floor lower still

If the subsistence line is set by the two dials, then moving a dial should move the line — and history furnishes one near-perfect experiment in which a dial was moved violently, by an outside force, for reasons that had nothing to do with anyone's grievance, and the equilibrium shifted exactly as the analysis predicts. The experiment is the Black Death, and it is worth following with care, because no episode shows the mechanism so plainly or proves it so completely.

One plague, two outcomes

When the plague swept Europe between 1346 and 1353, it killed something like half the population, and in doing so it turned, at a stroke, the dial of *exit*. Labour became desperately scarce; and scarce labour has somewhere to go. A surviving peasant could now run to a town that needed hands, or to a rival lord who would take him and ask no questions, and a runaway in those conditions was, as one historian puts it, nearly impossible to recover. The subject's outside option had leapt upward — and with it, his revolt-and-exit threshold. Now watch what the equilibrium did, and watch especially that it did *two opposite things* depending on a single difference between regions. In Western Europe, where towns were many and markets dense and the doors of exit could not be shut, the raised threshold held: lords who tried to keep the old extraction found their peasants simply leaving, the Statute of Labourers and its like proved unenforceable against the sheer pressure of scarcity, wages rose, and serfdom itself withered away, the floor beneath the Western peasant rising for the first time in centuries above bare subsistence. But in Eastern Europe, where towns were fewer and the lords could *collude* — could agree among themselves to bind the peasant to the land, to return one another's runaways, to shut every door at once — the very same shock produced the very opposite result: the second serfdom, an *intensification* of bondage, the floor driven lower rather than higher. The economists Acemoglu and Wolitzky, analysing exactly this divergence, put the mechanism in terms this study could have written: what decided whether the labour shortage freed the peasant or further bound him was whether the value of his outside options exceeded the returns to coercion — whether, in our terms, the exit dial could be held open or be forced shut. Where exit stayed open, the floor rose and serfdom died; where exit was foreclosed, coercion won and serfdom deepened. One plague, one shock to one dial, and two opposite equilibria, sorted entirely by whether the door could be kept shut. The subsistence line is not nature. It is the reading of the dials, and when a dial turns, the line moves.

PART VII

THE FLOOR THAT RISES

That the share of the man at the bottom is fixed by neither mercy nor nature but by the revolt threshold, and rises only when a dial turns in his favour — when the force that punishes him weakens, or a door of exit opens, or he gains the power to make his extraction costly — which is the cold hope the whole arithmetic finally yields

Gather the analysis and the man at the bottom comes into focus as the project has tried to see everyone: not through the robe that explains his condition, but through the ledger that produces it. His share is fixed by neither the mercy of his masters nor the iron law of nature. It is fixed by the revolt threshold — the point at which his cost of compliance would equal his cost of rising — and the extractor takes everything down to that threshold and stops there, because that is what both their ledgers command. The threshold, and so his share, is set by the two dials: the credibility of the force that would punish his revolt, and the availability of any exit by which he might escape. And this, which sounds at first like the bleakest conclusion the project has reached, contains within it the one piece of cold hope the whole arithmetic yields — for if the share is set by the dials, then the share *rises whenever a dial turns in the subject's favour*, and the dials can turn.

When the line moves up

There are exactly three ways the floor beneath the man at the bottom rises, and the whole corpus has, without quite naming it, been mapping them. The floor rises when the *force weakens* — when the cost of revolt falls because the enforcer fractures, exhausts itself, or is conquered, which is to say when the cost column empties in the way the study of elite chaos described; in such moments the subsistence line leaps upward and the bottom can take back some of what was taken, which is why the great gains of the labouring poor cluster, as that study found, around the cracks in the floor of force. The floor rises when a *door opens* — when exit becomes possible, as it did after the plague, as it did wherever a frontier or a growing city or a hungry rival gave the subject somewhere to run, so that the extractor must bid for his staying. And the floor rises when the subject gains the power to make his *extraction costly* — when he can combine, withhold his labour, organise the credible threat that turns his own compliance into something the extractor must pay to keep, which is the whole achievement of the union and the strike, the manufacture of a cost the master had not previously had to reckon with. In every case the mechanism is one: the subject's revolt-and-exit threshold rises, and the extractor, reading his ledger anew, finds that the floor he must leave beneath his people has risen with it. The man at the bottom does not escape the arithmetic; no one does. But the arithmetic is not fixed, and it is not nature, whatever the robe says. The peasant at subsistence is the reading of a ledger, and a ledger re-totals the instant its numbers change. The long work of lifting the floor beneath the lowest is not the work of softening the hearts of masters, which the ledger will always overrule, nor of waiting for a nature that will never move. It is the work of turning the dials — of weakening the force that pins him, opening the doors that would let him flee, and building him the power to make his own exploitation cost too much to be worth it. That is how the floor has risen before. It is the only way it has ever risen. And knowing that it is a ledger and not a law is the first turn of the dial.